

Obama 2.0: Less cool, more feisty

WASHINGTON, Jan 24 – President Barack Obama, who recently admitted to a disconnect with Americans, has nimbly shifted tracks in an attempt to recapture the old magic.

He struck a markedly populist tone while on a “listening tour” – as the White House described it – to Ohio state on Friday.

He flew to Ohio – a vital bellwether in November’s mid-term elections – visiting factories, dropping in on a diner and appearing at a town hall meeting in Elyria, bearing a campaign demeanour and what appeared to be a new game plan.

Call it Obama 2.0. It trades the cool, unruffled leader for a passionate, even aggressive, politician.

He declared repeatedly that he would keep “fighting” – using the word at least 13 times in his speech – for health care, financial reforms, jobs, restoring home values, education and openness in Washington.

“So long as I have the privilege of serving as your president, I will not stop fighting for you,” he said.

Five days before his State of the Union address, Obama said he was not backing off health-care reforms, although signals from Congress are to the contrary.

“I am not going to walk away from it just because it is hard... We are going to continue to keep on working to get this done with Democrats, Republicans – anyone who is willing to step up,” he said.

He also vowed to push ahead in his fight against Wall Street. “I guarantee you when we start on financial regulatory reform, trying to change the rules to prevent what has caused so much heartache all across the country, there are people who are going to say... it’s another example of Obama being big government,” the President said.

“No, I just want to have some rules in place so that when these guys make dumb decisions, you don’t end up having to foot the bill. That’s pretty straightforward. I don’t mind having that fight,” he told the people in Ohio, where unemployment is at 10.6 per cent – above the national average of 10 per cent.

The question is whether the new approach will assuage the public discontent that showed up both in the President’s below 50 per cent popularity ratings as well as the shock defeat of his Democratic Party in last week’s Senate race.

Will the imminent scaling down on health-care reforms while dialling up on financial regulation restore the shine to his presidency?

The premise is highly risky, for America continues to be a centre-right country ideologically. The heavy curbs on banks proposed by Obama last Thursday on top of the new “financial crisis responsibility fee” to recover the bailout funds and the other financial reforms pending in Congress amount to as much “big government” as the health-care plan which had turned off the Massachusetts voters.

As a new survey made clear, dissatisfaction with the direction of the country, antipathy towards federal-government activism and opposition to the Democrats’ health-care proposals drove the election of Republican Scott Brown in liberal Massachusetts last Tuesday. The defeat took away the Democrats’ supermajority and threatened Obama’s agenda.

Analysts say resorting to populism, such as casting banks as the villains, could invite a backlash.

“Mr Obama was elected because he was mild-demeanoured and spoke in a measured tone. Becoming more populist is a grave error. People will be confused as to who the real Obama is,” said John Samples who directs Cato Institute’s Centre for Representative Government.

Darrell West, the director of Governance studies at the Brookings Institution, said: “Mr Obama should be concerned not with his poll numbers, but with the unemployment rate plus other economic indicators. That is what drives his political standing. If he can make progress on the economy, his poll numbers will do fine.”

Yesterday, Obama, in his weekly radio and Internet address, also launched an extraordinary attack on the US Supreme Court, saying a ruling on corporate donations to political campaigns this week “strikes at democracy itself”.

Obama’s broadside was triggered by Thursday’s ruling that removed longstanding campaign finance limits and allowed corporations to spend freely in campaigns for president and Congress.

The ruling “gives the special interest lobbyists new leverage to spend millions on advertising to persuade elected officials to vote their way – or to punish those who don’t. This ruling strikes at democracy itself,” he said. – Straits Times

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